

commentary

from other pens...

Blue Cross decision was the right one

The Hays Daily News on Blue Cross decision:
 Kansas Insurance Commissioner Kathleen Sebelius deserves commendation for blackballing a deal to make Blue Cross-Blue Shield of Kansas part of a mega-insurance corporation.
 She was absolutely right about the prospects for higher premiums. When a company goes from nonprofit, owned by its policyholders, to for-profit, driven by stockholders, it has to make money somehow. It is going to be by charging its customers more.
 And Sebelius was absolutely right about that so-called vote by policyholders in favor of Anthem Insurance company's takeover of Blue Cross Kansas. It was something of a sham. While Blue Cross got a favorable vote of those who voted, Sebelius pointed out that, taking into consideration those who did not vote, 60 percent either voted no or did not vote. That was no mandate.

Moreover, many people insured with Blue Cross through company contracts got no vote at all; the company was allowed a single vote on behalf of all. ...
 The board chairman of Blue Cross Kansas was protesting after Sebelius' decision. He accused Sebelius of making her decision based on her aspirations for governor.
 "My take on it is she was trying to figure out how to please the most people and how to avoid controversy," Tom Simpson said.
 Pardon us, but is something wrong with the insurance commissioner making a decision that will please most of the people? ...
 Meanwhile, the experience with giant health care organizations has not been good. While it is not fair to say Anthem surely would be the same, Americans' bitter medicine from consolidation in the health insurance industry has been fewer choices, reduced services, higher rates and the introduction of a corporate mentality in medical decisions. ...
 ... We don't want it. Kansas' nonprofit, mutual insurance company is good just the way it is.

The Hutchinson News on farm pollution:
 The new farm bill approved Wednesday by the Senate is about more than subsidies. It also contains provisions to help farmers fulfill their role as stewards of the land.
 River pollution in agricultural states goes beyond a high bacteria count in the Arkansas River forcing Wichita to cancel water sport activities during its annual river festival. ...
 Farm pollutants have spread far beyond having an impact on underground aquifers and nearby cities. A recent study cites them as a prime factor in causing dead zones in the open seas ...
 To help address the problem, Sen. Tom Harkin, the Iowa Democrat who is chairman of the Agricultural Committee, has included in the farm bill several proposals to reduce water pollution. ...
 Crop producer groups have opposed the conservation proposals in the past, arguing that such programs divert funds from subsidies for wheat, corn and other farm commodities.
 But that approach has resulted in larger farms, which face greater financial pressures to boost yields or increase sales. In response, farmers apply more fertilizer to their crops or put more livestock on feed. Those moves lead to more nutrient runoff and add to river pollution.
 Farmers clearly need incentives to fulfill their role as stewards of the land. The federal government can offer the incentives through the 10-year, \$171 billion farm bill.

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HULME



Nothing more relaxing than a good rocking chair

I don't know about you, but I've been thinking about rocking chairs.
 What is more relaxing than the motion of a rocking chair? Most parents would agree a rocking chair is almost essential when there is a baby in the house.
 Rocking chairs seem to be important at both ends of the life cycle.
 Studies have shown that residents of a rest home are happier when they're rocking. There's something soothing about rocking.
 Just the sight of one can bring on nostalgia. Most of us see one and think of a similar chair at our grandparents' home or one we used when the children were small. They just make us a little gentler - at least for a moment. Rocking chairs make us mellow. Drive by a home where there are rocking



lorna g. t.
 • commentary

chairs on the front porch.
 Don't you long for the peace that suggests? The reality of sitting there and just watching the world go by is probably impossible for most of us. We feel we need to be doing something. But rocking is doing something; try it sometime.
 Rocking chairs can be addictive as well as seductive. We idealize the memories or long for some unhurried time when we can just sit and relax. I would rank relaxation high on the list of things

people in our society need.
 But that word means different things to different generations - or at least in the different stages of life. Relaxation to the younger generations usually means TGIF or going somewhere for some kind of paid activity. I think as you get older relaxation means more like non-activity, time for reflection, staying away from crowds, spending time at home in the rocking chair or recliner.
 We need to watch out though for that though. It's a kind of sedation.
 After a lifetime of too much activity, we can easily give in to doing nothing. Even if you enjoy your rocking activity, be careful to keep your mind alert and active. Periodically drag out your memories, but don't live in the past. Too much rocking can addle the brain.

'Ecology hike' like stepping into the past

You could call it a trip into another world, but it gave us a vision of how rapidly parts of the Third World are moving into the new century.
 On vacation in southern Baja California, we signed up for an "ecology hike" into the mountains, which tower up to 7,000 feet over Baja's beaches. It sounded like a chance to see country few tourists get into, and we like to walk.
 Our tour leader, Caesar Moyrun, picked us up at the condos and we started on an 85-kilometer drive to the far side of the peninsula, where we would turn and head up a dirt track into the mountains.
 Caesar seldom stops talking, which makes him an interesting guide. He explained that he grew up in the mountains. His family raised goats. It was more than 12 miles on dirt trails to the school in Todos Santos so he lived in the church so he could go to school.
 When he was 14, an American doctor invited him to spend a year going to school in Sacramento, but after that time in California, he came home to the Third World. His parents arranged a marriage - she was 13 and they had never met - and put him to work on the ranch.
 Caesar thinks he and his wife, now near 30, have been lucky. They're best friends, he said. They live in town and their son and daughter go to school. His wife finished her college degree (he said there are branches of six colleges in the Cabo San Lucas area now) in tourism administration. Now he is finishing his degree in biology.
 His passion is preserving and restoring the mountains, and he hopes they can buy a ranch and build cabins for tourists. His wife would run the business, and he would give the tours.
 He won't be arranging his daughter's marriage.



steve haynes
 • along the sappa

We listened to his stories as we bounced along the road to the ranch, El Refugio, in Cañon San Dionisio. He said the month before, he had spent three weeks guiding Martha Stewart and her cameraman around the Baja. He hopes the footage is on her television program this spring. He thought she was bossy, but she promised to bring a crew to help him reforest part of the mountains.
 The ranch spoke of another era. Its four rooms held 18 people from three generations. The owners, Catalino and Luz Rosas, are godparents to his children, Caesar said.
 They have always lived in the mountains, walking into town for supplies. Their son Jorge has a truck now and drives everyone - his wife to work as a teacher, kids to school, himself to work as a palapa, or thatched roof, builder. We meet him taking Jacqueline, about 10, to school.
 The ranch has lights from a solar panel, but the kitchen is a cinder-block wood stove under a palapa roof outside. The family has clean water, a two-inch pipe from a sand filter bed next to the clear mountain stream. You use a bucket to flush the toilet, and I don't ask where it goes.
 Catalino is butchering a cow, salting the beef to make jerky. No scrap is being wasted. The udders are in a pot on the stove which we hope is not lunch. (Caesar says they will go into a special soup.)
 Caesar takes us two hours up the trail. Usually,

there are more tourists, he said, but another party canceled today. There are just the three of us. The country is rough exposed white granite, spiked with hundred-year-old cactus, native trees, an occasional flower. Caesar knows them all.
 Near the end of the hike, we stop at a pool. Across the creek is a 400-year-old fig tree. It's amazing. There are cottonwoods, ficus, palms, all native Mexican species, some found only on the isolated Baja.
 We walk back. Luz has been preparing lunch at the ranch. She makes tortillas with ease, a few pats and they are perfectly round, perfectly flat. There are beans, salad, salsa, hot sauce, all grown on the ranch. Gardens surround the house, irrigated from the pipe. Flowers grow over archways, up the walls.
 Luz makes quesadillas on the wood griddle, tortillas filled with cheese and a couple of flowers, nasturtium or, at Caesar's insistence, squash blossoms picked fresh for the guests.
 He shows us how to open them, pour in beans and some of the mixed greens. Add more flowers, some salsa and hot sauce. Mexican food has never been this good, but watch the sauce.
 In an hour, we'll be back at the hotel, amid the concrete-and-glass reality of modern Mexico. Most of the workers there live in vast new housing developments which have sprung up around the resorts. There are more of them in less house than we are used to, but they are miles and years removed from the ranch.
 Yet the family, one foot in the 19th century, has at least a toe in the 21st. And while Caesar longs to move back to his mountains, you can imagine that the future for most of the children will be in town as well.

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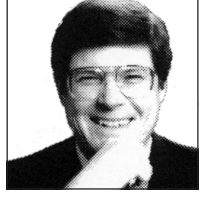
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GOP attack ads diminish Bush's image as 'uniter'

They may not be "despicable" or constitute "political profiteering," but Republican attack ads against five Democratic Senators certainly diminish President Bush's claim to be a unifying president.
 They undercut his assertions he's seeking bipartisan solutions to the nation's problems and wants to improve the political atmosphere in Washington.
 It's beyond imagining the Bush White House did not sign off on the spots that, in effect, charge five vulnerable Democrats with putting politics ahead of national unity in the midst of a war.
 Of course, the ads never explicitly mention the war on terrorism. But the announcer's voice says, "When times are tough, Americans unite. We put aside our differences and do what's best for the nation." The screen shows images of firefighters and American flags. It's not subtle.
 Then comes an image of Bush, and the narrator says, "It's your President Bush and moderate Democrats who reached a compromise plan" for economic stimulus.
 "But, sadly, partisan Democrats like (Senator's name) voted against that compromise." The ad continues with Bush saying, "There's something more important than politics and that's to do our jobs."
 Directed against Sens. Tim Johnson (S.D.), Paul Wellstone (Minn.), Jean Carnahan (Mo.), Tom Harkin (Iowa) and Max Baucus (Mont.), the ads end by urging viewers to tell the senator to do his or her job.
 Almost certainly, the White House gave the National Republican Senatorial Committee at least the go-ahead to use clips of Bush in such incendiary ads, though White House political adviser Karl



morton kondracke
 • commentary

Rove wouldn't answer questions on the matter.
 Democrats erupted when the spots went on the air and demanded Bush repudiate them, which he didn't. Jim Jordan, executive director of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, called them "despicable."
 He told me, "This is extraordinary pimping of the war effort ... exploitation of the war." The liberal St. Louis Post-Dispatch denounced the Carnahan version of the ad as "political war-profiteering" in an editorial headlined "Low Down and Dirty."
 Those may be harsh judgments, but it certainly is unseemly and unproductive for the president to go negative so early in an election year when he claims to be trying to keep the nation united.
 Professor Larry Sabato of the University of Virginia said, "Inevitably, the party whose president is leading a successful war effort is going to try to take advantage of it, but you're always better off doing it subtly. Those ads are blatant."
 In his speeches, President Bush hasn't been very subtle in trying to use his primacy as a war leader to advance his domestic policy agenda, but at least he's stayed a step removed from raw partisan politics.
 In the State of the Union he applauded Congress for its "unity and resolve" on war issues, adding, "Now Americans deserve to have the same spirit

directed toward addressing problems here at home. I'm a proud member of my party; yet as we act to win the war, protect our people and create jobs in America, we must act first and foremost not as Republicans, not as Democrats, but as Americans."
 Jordan asserted the GOP attack ads signal that Bush "has given up on trying to get anything done in this Congress." By attacking even senators who voted for his tax cuts - Carnahan, Baucus and Johnson - Bush, he said, had "lessened the incentive of Democrats to cooperate with him."
 Jordan acknowledged the ads are "potentially powerful" and "will cut through the clutter and be noticed by voters," but Sabato thinks "they won't work politically" because "Bush won't have coattails in the midterm."
 Sabato does expect Republicans will keep control of the House in November because the economy will have improved by the fall and because redistricting has given the GOP an extra half-dozen seats. He said he can't predict who'll control the Senate, now Democratic by a one-vote margin.
 Bush is so popular the GOP ads probably haven't damaged his reputation with the public, but repeated negativity and partisanship could dim his halo.
 He ought to be mindful of the example of Woodrow Wilson, who called for a suspension of partisan politics during World War I, then declared that it was "imperatively necessary" that Congress remain in Democratic hands for the sake of national unity. Wilson lost control of both the House and Senate.
 Morton Kondracke is executive editor of Roll Call, the newspaper of Capitol Hill.